Shalom Political Theology: A New Type of Mennonite Peace Theology for a New Era of Discipleship

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Introduction

In my office I have a small stack of photocopied booklets with black plastic comb binding and cream-colored card stock for the cover. On several occasions I have used this modest publication—*Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types*[1] —as a textbook, making sure to have a least one extra copy on hand because it is not easy to come by. What I have found so useful about this simple collection of essays is that it makes undergraduate students open their eyes wide in wonder. It raises a question they never thought to ask: Is there more than one way to be a Mennonite pacifist?

This booklet opened my eyes and heart, and this expository essay is both a homage to the *Panorama* and an offering of a new form of Mennonite peace theology—shalom political theology (hereafter SPT)—that has grown from my grounding in the traditions of Mennonite peace theologies, plural.[2] What follows affirms the importance of cultivating a variety of peace theology types, and builds on the original typology by offering SPT as a synergistic blend of some of the lesser-known types featured in the *Panorama* with the hope that Historic Peace Churches (hereafter HPCs) will continue to use their unique forms of theologizing to align with God's reconciling purposes and vision in the world.[3]

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[1] John Richard Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee Peace Office, 1991).

[2] I have developed the initial form of shalom political theology (SPT) in Malinda Elizabeth Berry, "'This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace': A Constructive Theology of Social Responsibility, Nonviolence and Nonconformity" (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, New York, 2013). This essay both revises and adds to my original discussion, and significant portions of it are drawn directly from that longer work (available online at https://ambs.academia.edu/MalindaElizabethBerry).

[3] By "Historic Peace Churches" I refer to the Church of the Brethren, Mennonites, and the Society of Friends, a cluster of denominations that understand themselves to be pacifistic.

The Case for a New Type and its Components

Why is there a need for a new form of peace theology? Aren't ten types sufficient? Well, no. In broad terms, lived theology, which Mennonite peace theology is, is constantly in dialogue with the world around it, requiring articulations of how a biblical vision of peace is central to Christian faith. My offering alone does not meet this requirement, because while our working typology has included voices influenced by experiences from around the world, as John A. Lapp notes in his preface to the *Panorama*, our typology has yet to include and be reliant on African, Asian, Australian, and Latin American voices.[4] More specifically, there are three reasons for expanding the ten types.

First, for understandable reasons Mennonite peace theology has been a discourse dominated by men's voices, perspectives, and personal narratives. The *Panorama* is a case in point. While women participated in the consultation that led to the booklet's publication, only two of the ten contributors were women, and even then, women were not identified as proponents of any of the types of peace theology under scrutiny.[5] This gender imbalance is a moral problem in light of the denominational *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. Article 6 articulates a theological anthropology that understands women and men as "equally and wonderfully made in the divine image," with Article 15 affirming that the Holy Spirit calls both women and men to be leaders in the church.[6] Because we have these convictions about women, it is important that women's voices, perspectives, and personal narratives actively shape our tradition. I am putting forward SPT as a feminist approach to Mennonite peace theology.[7]

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[4] John A. Lapp, preface to *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types*.

[5] Three notable works that are part correctives to this trend include Elizabeth Yoder, ed*., Peace Theology and Violence against Women* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992); Rosalee Bender et al., *Piecework: A Women's Peace Theology* (Winnipeg: Mennonite Central Committee Canada, 1997); and Carol Penner, "Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence against Women" (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, 1999).

[6] "Article 6. Creation and Calling of Human Beings" and "Article 15. Ministry and Leadership," *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective,* http://mennoniteusa.org/confession-of-faith/ministry-and-leadership/, accessed February 1, 2016.

[7] Throughout this essay, I use "feminist" as an umbrella term for critical woman-centered

Second, historical dimensions have had contextual sway in shaping Mennonite peace theology types. For example, the post-World War II project of making pacifism intellectually respectable was one that consumed HPC scholars. As a junior scholar, I observe that today we do not have a well-defined or obvious scholarly community that sees itself as charged with the task of keeping peace theology alive for subsequent generations in the same way as those featured in the *Panorama*. That is, having established Anabaptist-informed pacifism as an intellectually respectable Christian stance, it is appropriate to consider how moments like the end of the Cold War, the advent of the War on Terrorism, the global recognition of the Green Belt Movement, #BlackLivesMatter, and the long-overdue closures of Indian residential/boarding schools and Magdalene laundries become points of interest for HPCs in light of decades of political advocacy for alternatives to military service in wartime. Thus I put forward SPT as a member of Generation X, interested in how both church and society are faring as our social and institutional lives change dramatically and rapidly.

Third, the pacifism of the Messianic community (Type 5 in the *Panorama*) is arguably the most common form of peace theology among US Mennonites. One of its weaknesses is that it is insufficient for helping contemporary Anabaptist communities make theological sense of social problems that indict the church for its inability to stand with the oppressed.[8] While several other types in the *Panorama* work to address this weakness (i.e., social responsibility, radical pacifism, realist pacifism, and liberation pacifism), the prominence of scholarship in the tradition of John Howard Yoder translates into limited debate about methodological blind spots in the pacifism of the Messianic community. This provides another reason for my arguing for SPT: to disrupt the hegemonic qualities of our peace theological discourse.

This essay has three parts. Part I weaves together James Evans's work on social problems as theological problems and Dorothee Soelle's work with

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approaches to theological and ethical concerns that includes both global feminist perspectives and US movements of Asian American feminism, black feminism, womanism, Latina feminism, mujerista, native feminism, and white feminism.

[8] A few high-profile examples include clergy sexual abuse cases in the Roman Catholic Church, the HIV/AIDS crisis in the Black Church, Christians on either side of the marriage equality/sanctity of marriage debate, and climate change denials centered in Evangelical groups.

mystical political theology. This section gives the reader a way to anchor my use of political theology in the sea of books, essays, and articles that are also concerned with where, how, why, and to what effect our God-talk meets various forms of political concern. Part II develops the biblical warrant for SPT. My argument is that through the perspective of wisdom literature, biblical shalom is linked to the theological motifs of Creation, the prophetic oracles of the Peaceable Kingdom, and Jesus' proclamation of the *basileia tou Theou* (the kingdom of God). This continuity becomes the synergistic hermeneutic that focuses peace theology as form of theological wisdom.

Part III is a constructive proposal for SPT, along with examples of how SPT can interrogate and re-shape the theo-ethical life of faith communities in ways that peace theology has not historically done. I direct my proposal to communities of Christians persuaded that peace, justice, and nonviolence are central to faith, values, and ethics; those communities may be ecumenical or denominationally particular. SPT integrates the principles of theological anthropology, nonviolence, and nonconformity as I have come to articulate them through my encounters with Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Doris Janzen Longacre.[9]

I should make a methodological comment here. SPT is not "biblical theology" in the classic, disciplinary sense of the term. Nor is SPT primarily a systematics or a particular theological ethic. SPT is a constructive theological offering that integrates three dimensions of confessional discourse —biblical study, theological reflection, and ethical engagement—into a biblical theo-ethic of shalom manifesting as discipleship committed to nonviolence and nonconformity.

I: Political Theology and Peace Theology

Because God loves the world, to love and serve God is to embrace and serve the

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[9] Martin Luther King, Jr. was unfaithful to his spouse Coretta Scott King. Scholars have documented this aspect of King's life, and I am grateful for their fact-finding and analysis. As a feminist Christian, I am uneasy about drawing on and using King as a source for my work, knowing that he used patriarchal privilege to dominate women. I hold this tension by naming his failings, reading him critically, and striving to direct readers' attention to him not as an exemplar but as one who contributed ideas to the public sphere of Christian theology and ethics that are worth learning from and adapting in light of his transgressions.

world God loves. Such a confession is political, calling us to account for how we believe God does or does not sanction our human polities and enactments of human power. Political theological confession involves looking outwardly and inwardly, and also involves dialogical communication and multivalent awareness that keeps outward and inward realities in conversation with each other. An inward glance that turns outward might raise the question, How is God present in my life, and what difference does God's love make in how I see the world? Peering outwardly to contemplate public policy dilemmas can shape internal conversations in faith communities and how they do or do not use power equitably. Such confession has led me to consider theologians James H. Evans, Jr. and Dorothee Soelle, both because their work expands what we typically think of as political theology and because it is shaped by their outward and inward seeing commensurate with social justice hermeneutics endemic to Mennonite peace theology. In many ways the term "political theology" is trendy, and therefore requires unpacking. However, I will limit my discussion to how Evans's and Soelle's uses of it shape how I employ political theology as the discursive framework for SPT.[10]

In short, Evans links social problems to practical theology and political theology through African American experience, both chastening political theology and calling for a hermeneutics of suspicion of ourselves, lest we think too highly of the state and too little of the church or vice versa. He helps SPT call Mennonite communities to account for the moments when power in the Messianic community goes unchecked, protecting members who act sinfully and thinking the state cannot be an agent of God's justice. Similarly, Soelle calls for a hermeneutics of suspicion in order to reclaim a form of Christian piety that recognizes how God-talk also functions as political speech. Her particular contribution to SPT comes from bringing her exploration of mysticism to bear on social problems and their relationship to the ego, possessions, and violence. She posits that we are all mystics, making "God desires fullness of life for all" the central theological basis for distinguishing between false and genuine mysticism.[11] I will now explicate

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[10] Readers interested in my detailed analysis and evaluation of political theology may want to consult my dissertation at https://ambs.academia.edu/MalindaElizabethBerry.

[11] Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance,* trans. Barbara Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 52-55.

these two writers' perspectives and contributions to SPT in more detail.

As Evans describes how his book *We Shall All Be Changed: Social Problems and Theological Renewal* is a work of practical theology, he says that his interest is in offering a deeply theological response to persistent social problems, because how we expect Christian witness to interact with such problems is complicated and requires sustained theological analysis.[12] But he is not interested in simply analyzing social problems; he wants to address what he calls "two deeply felt needs": a public longing for spiritual renewal and a similar longing for common ground through social transformation.

As I survey the global landscape, I concur with Evans. From climate change and critiques of the industrial food system to hidden but persistent human trafficking and sexual violence, from gun violence at home and drone attacks far away to shrinking congregations and growing religiously motivated violence, it does not take long for social justice-oriented Christians to wonder exactly how God is making all things new in our time. Evans argues that these two desires, spiritual renewal and social transformation, are not only deeply felt but deeply connected.[13] As he makes his case for understanding what links social problems, spiritual renewal, and social transformation, he offers valuable commentary on how practical theology's discourse is related to other kinds of God-talk, notably political theology. Evans argues that by developing an awareness of social problems, however immediate or removed they are from our most direct experiences, we have new access to questions about ultimate reality. "Face to face with God, the theological dimensions of social problems are brought to light," he says, "and the social dimensions of theological problems become apparent."[14]

Evans laments the persistent majority of theologians who do not consider social problems and dilemmas to be their bailiwick. If and when those problems do enter theological conversations, he contends, they do so under the umbrella of ethics, to which he makes this objection: "Assigning

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[12] James H. Evans Jr., *We Shall All Be Changed: Social Problems and Theological Renewal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), v.

[13] Ibid., 89-90.

[14] Ibid., 10. In making his case, Evans appropriates Gordon Kaufman's concept of mystery, which Evans describes as "the name we give to our ongoing attempts to find meaning in and solutions to those human problems that appear to be timeless, permanent, novel, contemporary, but always intractable" (11).

discussion of social problems in theological discourse solely to the field of ethics does justice to neither the field of ethics nor the influence of these problems on Christian witness in our times."[15] At best, such a disconnect makes ethical action merely habitual and reflexive: Christians simply respond to their enemies with love without a second thought because that is what Christians are supposed to do. At worst, without offering a deeper spirituality or moral grounding beyond a basic biblicism, Christians' actions may be ethical in an objective sense but not in a subjective sense, because their actions lack the basic theological reflection that goes hand-in-glove with ethics.

Theology in its broadest sense, Evans argues, is a combination of three different but closely related elements: fundamental or foundational theology, systematic theology, and practical theology.[16] From the German schools, Evans cites Friedrich Schleiermacher and Gerhard Ebeling. The former considered practical theology to be the aspects of theological education that give the organization and structure of the church's life as a polity and a community. The latter argued that practical theology is the theory giving form and shape to church leadership, compared to other disciplines of theological education providing the content of that leadership. Evans contrasts this German perspective with those of John Macquarrie (United Kingdom) and David Tracy (United States), both of whom grant practical theology a wider definition: it is concerned with "the ecclesiastical life of the community."[17]

Evans notes that both Macquarrie and Tracy define practical theology in a way that aligns it with political theology. Political theology is a theological discourse that explores Christian understanding of how God does or does not sanction human structuring of nation-states. Contemporary political theology also incorporates social analysis of human power dynamics as a vital part of its method. In this way, political theology is always going to reflect on institutions, and where political theologies part ways is in their

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[15] Ibid., 1.
[16] Ibid., 2.
[17] See John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1977), 127; and David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 6ff.

view of the state. What Evans brings into the discussion is his concern about political theologies' tendency to collapse state and church. On one hand, Schleiermacher and Ebeling seem to take such a high view of the church that it becomes a "divinely ordered political community." On the other, Macquarrie and Tracy both assume that the state is a "justly ordered polis." It is at this point that Evans levels his critique, arguing that in the US "where African Americans have been oppressed by despotic notions of the state and excluded by truncated notions of the church, theocracy or a narrow ecclesiasticism become suspect as points of departure for practical theology" and, I would add, for political theology.[18]

Dorothee Soelle's *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* is another example of the paradigm Evans establishes. Her approach to political/ practical theology is activist in its orientation but also mystical. And like Evans, she laments the split between theology and ethics. She shares his hope that our human imagination will grow stronger, so that we can unite our experiences of the world with how we live in the world.[19]

Soelle's intention in *The Silent Cry* is to integrate her mystical spiritual experiences, borne of everyday living, with her life in the academy and in the institutional church. In particular, she wants to correct the impression that mystics received their most profound insights in isolation. "Was the demeanor of flight from the world, separation, and solitude adequate for mysticism?" she asks. "Were there not also other forms of expressing mystical consciousness to be found in the life of communities as well as individuals?" Soelle concludes that we base many of our assumptions on a false distinction between the mystical as internal and the political as external. With a desire to repair this breech, she writes, "everything that is within needs to be externalized so it doesn't spoil, like the manna in the desert that was hoarded for future consumption." And there are models of mysticism that remind us that "there is no experience of God that can be so privatized that it becomes and remains the property of one owner, the privilege of a person of leisure, the esoteric domain of the initiated." From Soelle's perspective, our times call for mysticism imbued with a spirit of resistance and a passion for

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[18] Evans, *We Shall All Be Changed,* 2.
[19] Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance,* 5.

transformation—a declaration of No! in the face of injustice.[20]

By introducing mysticism into the discourse of political theology, Soelle hopes to contribute to personal healing and communal transformation.

> To read texts of mysticism is to have renewed cognition of one's self, of a being that is buried under rubble. Thus, the discovery of the mystical tradition also sets free one's own forgotten experience. . . . If it is true that God is love, then the separation of religion and ethics—or, in the technical terminology of the academy, the separation of systematic theology and social ethics—is dangerous as well as detrimental to both sides. It is self-destructive for religion and ethics because it empties religion, reducing its basis for experiencing the world. It turns ethics into arbitrary arrangements of individual tribes and hordes.[21]

In identifying the importance of the existential aspects of religious experience and the meaning of Christian faith, she is talking about the search for shalom.

Together, Evans and Soelle reinforce the deeply Anabaptist impulse to keep theology and ethics knitted together with a biblical view of the world. Through their unique paradigms of political theology, they also bring something new to conversations about peace theology: the multivalent dialogue between what we see when we look both outwardly beyond ourselves and inwardly at ourselves (as individuated people, tight-woven faith communities, minority subcultures). Evans's integration of spiritual renewal and social transformation, and Soelle's belief in mysticism's power to be a catalyst for personal healing and communal transformation, offer Mennonite peace theological discourse a theological framework for communal self-examination as a spiritual necessity.

As Anabaptist Christians, we regard our original sin as not equated with our nature but with the self-conscious choice for evil rather than good. Baptism, according to Pilgram Marpeck, marks our choice to crucify sin and experience resurrection and new life in Jesus Christ.[22] God's grace is present

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[20] Ibid., 3.
[21] Ibid., 6.
[22] Pilgram Marpeck, *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck,* trans. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978), 108ff.

in our lives as a midwife, an agent of rebirth and regeneration. Psalm 34:14 comes to mind: "Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it." This is not a platitude but an invitation to seriously consider the theo-ethical challenges of shalom-oriented love and service united by the socially transformative and mystical pathway of God's politics: making peace as we seek justice by keeping our eyes focused outwardly and inwardly.

II: Theological Perspectives on Biblical Shalom

In Sunday school most of us learn that "shalom" is the Hebrew word for peace. What we tend not to learn is how holistic this peace is. "Peace" is an important term, but the cultural baggage it carries in Mennonite communities has led me to give "Peace" a break. In opting instead for "shalom" I am signaling that SPT is interested in holistic theo-ethical education and formation. Peace theology is something academics offer to the church, so that together we might innovate a way of being missional that is both socially responsible and nonviolent.

      Shalom is the principle that links prophetic testimony of the Peaceable Kingdom oracles, found in Isaiah and Hosea, with Jesus' prophetic proclamations about the *basileia tou Theou*, particularly in the Synoptic Gospels.[23] In this part of the essay I seek to establish a theological definition of shalom that serves as the foundation for SPT and supports the holistic formation of disciples who know how to respond nonviolently to conflict within and beyond the church, and to offer a credible Christian witness that empowers others to make the same commitment.

Four Dimensions of *Shalom*
In *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace*, Perry B. Yoder provides a four-part definition of the word that encapsulates God's intention for wholeness. In one sense, shalom refers to material wellbeing and economic prosperity. When we ask after someone's shalom—"How are you? How are your loved ones?"—we are asking after their health, financial situation,

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[23] Peaceable Kingdom references include passages like Isa. 2:2-4, 11:1-9, 65:17-25, and Hos. 2:15-20. A key theme is a cessation of violence between creatures who now have a predator/prey relationship. Weapons of violence and warfare are also laid aside or become tools for agricultural work.

or even physical safety and security.[24] In a second sense, shalom refers to social relationships and God's desire for justice to permeate the interactions between neighbors and nations. Moreover, the presence of shalom gives rise to a feeling of God working to end suffering and oppression. "Thus," Yoder writes, "in the arena of human relations, we see that shalom describes the way things ought to be . . . [involving] a much wider and more positive state of affairs than a narrow understanding of peace as antiwar or antimilitary activity."[25]

In a third sense, shalom refers to moral and ethical dimensions of our lives. Persons of shalom act with integrity and speak straightforwardly, and their conduct is in stark contrast with oppressors who deceive and speak falsely.[26] Yoder's discussion includes commentary on shalom's relationship to ancient Israel's law and the development of its political institutions, extending into the first century CE. As these institutions shifted from the time of the judges to the era of kingship with its accompanying structures, and ultimately to Roman imperialism, God's expectation of (political) leaders was constant: it is their duty "to implement substantive justice which leads to shalom."[27]

The word *eirene*, the Greek New Testament's counterpart to shalom, adds another layer of meaning that enlarges shalom's theological meaning. Yoder points out that in Paul's letters, the apostle refers to *eirene tou Theou*, the peace of God, which Paul uses to interpret the gospel. This new meaning builds on God's interest in justice within social relationships by bringing God's relationship with us into the dynamic. There can only be shalom between people and God, Yoder writes, "because things have been made right between them. The result of Christ's transforming death is not only a transformation of human-divine relationships, but it also transforms affairs between people."[28] Shalom is the site of social transformation where God renews communities.

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[24] Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice and Peace* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1998), 11-13.
[25] Ibid., 13-15.
[26] Ibid., 15-16.
[27] Ibid., 100.
[28] Ibid., 20-21.

A Realist Hermeneutical Move

Howard John Loewen has made a study of HPC denominational statements on the theme of peace, in which he observes that their documents cite 98 references from 26 biblical books, with roughly two-thirds of these references coming from the NT.[29] Undoubtedly, the Gospels provide the Christian tradition with resources for developing a "peace theology" based on Jesus' teachings and invitation to people in his time and in our day to become his disciples. However, our reliance on the Gospel accounts does not mean that we have turned our backs on the OT altogether. Most often those who have taken on the challenge of working with the Hebrew Bible have followed the scholars who diverge from Gerhard von Rad's path and the "anti-kingship tradition" of biblical studies. Millard C. Lind's work stands out here: *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel.*[30]

However, there is another course we might follow in relation to peace theology and the Bible. Rather than look backwards from the NT to the OT, we can employ a hermeneutic that looks forward, highlighting how social justice concerns naturally figure in the biblical material. Instead of working within the traditional paradigms of OT biblical theology, we can use this discipline to establish signposts for making thematic and genre connections within the Bible's diversity, and thereby build a bypass of sorts around the traditional "holy way thickets." These signposts are the prophets,[31] wisdom literature,[32] and shalom (this last is the canonical biblical principle at the center of everything).[33]

This is a Christian realist move inspired by my readings of Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King, Jr. Breaking with some streams of Mennonite scholarship, I am not interested in whether or not God is nonviolent. I am interested in arguing that biblical warfare is an example of human nature at

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[29] Howard John Loewen, "An Analysis of the Use of Scripture in the Churches' Documents on Peace," in *The Church's Peace Witness,* ed. Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 19.

[30.] Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980).

[31] See Matt. 13:53-58, Mark 6:1-6a, and Luke 4:16-30.

[32] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 67-68.

[33] Yoder, *Shalom*, 5.

work: self-interest, self-deception, anxiety, and hubris in all their glory. As such, I do not believe that God purposefully wills warfare, because it violates the moral foundation of the universe, which is God's Great Shalom. Violence is never redemptive, even if and when it is effective in confronting evil. The theological meaning we make of violence through our God-given reason, imagination, and memory is where God's redemptive power shines through. Thus, it is the renunciation of violence that is redemptive. I arrive at these conclusions by drawing on the Bible's wisdom literature.

Wisdom's *Shalom* Theology

In *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, Bruce Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence Fretheim, and David Petersen explain that "Old Testament theology" simply refers to interpretive moves that take seriously "the claim of the text that it is speaking about encounter and relationship with God."[34] Although the OT is a "collection of polyphonic voices," the authors argue that while this feature is a gift, it also signals the importance of locating the coherence and continuity of Israel's encounter with God as Israel becomes the ethos of the incarnation and the early church. The OT, then, is focused on God's character and activity within the framing context of Israel's story as God's people.[35]

Alongside the historical narratives and law, biblical literature includes the genre of wisdom literature (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus, and Wisdom of Solomon), which Birch et al. acknowledge is a "broad and imprecise" category. Yet, they argue, there are five characteristics of these books that form what I would call interpretive principles that give wisdom literature its coherence.

First, wisdom literature concerns itself with everyday things like speech, money, friendship, work, sexuality, and land, rather than events such as the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt. Second, in bringing readers' attention to the stuff of life, wisdom literature gives voice to its writers' view that "these mundane matters [are] shot through with ethical significance and ethical outcomes," giving us cause to bring our own experience to theological

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[34] Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence Fretheim, and David Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 17.
[35] Ibid., 30.

reflection. Third, "the wisdom teachers want to communicate to the young—those still to be inducted into the lore of the community—its distinctive sense of how life is to be lived well." Fourth, wisdom writers have made careful and studied observations of the world around them that offer a form of systems analysis, to speak anachronistically.[36] Fifth, and most important for SPT, wisdom literature is theological literature (contrary to claims that this literature is insufficiently religious or confessional) by speaking of Yahweh's creative work and intention for the world:

> It is widely recognized that wisdom theology is a 'theology of creation,' that is, a reflection of faith upon the world intended by the creator. It is clear that the creator God intends that the world should be whole, safe, prosperous, peaceable, just, fruitful, and productive, that is, that the world should be marked in every part by shalom. To that end, the creator God has set limits and built into creation rewards and punishments that are evoked and set in motion by wise or foolish actions. But these limits are not self-evident. They must be discerned over a long period of time by the study of many "cases," in order to notice what actions produce trouble. The premise of all such observations and generalizations is that the large matrix of life and well-being is the creation of God. The creator God has willed that all parts of creation are delicately related to one another, and therefore every decision, every act matters to the shape and well-being of the whole.[37]

The wisdom writers offer a global, cosmopolitan rhetoric of biblical faith. They urge us to read these scriptural texts as literature that moves us beyond "clichéd Christianity," favoring an openness that affirms a basic fact: "life in God's world is a way of faith to be celebrated."[38] Their conclusion describes a hermeneutic that encourages us to weave wisdom's insight together with the prophets' oracles of hope and judgment. The wisdom-prophecy tapestry poses an important challenge to readings that advance

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[36] Ibid., 374-76.
[37] Ibid., 376.
[38] Ibid., 377.

chosenness-, nation-, and exceptionalist-centered interpretations of the OT.

H. H. Schmid offers further support for this unconventional approach to biblical theology.[39] In the 1970s, Schmid began advocating for reading the OT corpus with a focus on Creation—the beginning of the world and the nature of its order under God's law—rather than a focus on Israel's history as an ethnically defined nation. His approach calls for an emphasis on peace, running contrary to the trend developed and defended by Gerhard von Rad that views warfare, specifically holy warfare, as "a very central and positive element of the entire theology of the Old Testament."[40]

Commentator James Barr argues that Schmid rejects the holy war paradigm of biblical theology because it is based on "a nationally limited understanding of God which is closely connected with the ancient understanding of the world."[41] This means that an ethnocentric quality takes hold of biblical interpretation, leading to a view of the cosmos as composed of the chosen and the unchosen. When the world is centered on and ordered around such a particular ethnos, then "the enemies, the foreign peoples [to that ethnos], are basically seen as manifestations of chaos and have to be repelled in the interests of the cosmos."[42] If we rely on this paradigm, then we neglect the witness of a fundamental character of Creation. Schmid writes, "die Bibel geht davon aus, daß der Frieden die eigentliche Bestimmung der Welt ist"[43] ("the Bible proceeds on this basis, that peace is the world's real destiny"). To this Barr adds that understanding peace as the world's destiny becomes a statement about "a basic need of humanity to live in a sound, ordered world."[44] However, this peace is not the Pax Romana or a desperate repression of conflict. It is God's shalom.

Together, the biblical perspectives of Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, Petersen, Yoder, and Schmid, and what I read as their theological implications, provide the hermeneutics I am advocating: a way of reading the Bible with

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[39] James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 327.

[40] Ibid., 326

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Hans Heinrich Schmid, *Altorientalische Welt in der Alttestamentlichen Theologie*, 6 Aufsätze (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974), 116.

[44] Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology,* 327.

a view of the world and human identity that extends beyond a narrow definition of "God's chosen people," one that reads the biblical witness as a sourcebook documenting human beings' navigation of the interplay of violence and nonviolence. When we lay aside a rigid hermeneutics of chosenness—the idea that the Bible is simply the story of Israel—we are able to adopt an intercultural reading of the biblical text which puts cultural differences in relationship with each other, rather than elevating one set of cultural norms above others. Taking a "global" view of the world allows us to pay attention to the biblical message that everything is connected. It is from this organic sense of wholeness that I now turn to a brief outline of SPT's theo-ethical components built on this biblical and theological foundation.

III: Shalom Political Theology

In aligning with Evans's and Soelle's approaches to political theology that draw attention to the pervasiveness of injustice, SPT can meet urgent demands for justice with an attitude of wisdom. However clear an act of injustice may be, it cannot simply be overcome by human willpower to defy sin, evil, and oppression. "If we just mobilize enough volunteers." "If we can just get enough signatures on our petition." "If we can just prove they are behind this outrage." "What they're doing is just wrong!" Self-righteous anger alone is not enough to solve our problems. Moreover, when we begin with an interest in shalom, we look at the world through the lenses of sin and grace. To seek God's shalom for the world involves paying attention to how sin (unbelief, rebellion, inordinate self-love, self-deception) decimates relationships and how grace (repentance, humility, renewed trust, forgiveness) preserves them. Only when we can see both types of power at work in the world will we be ready to conceptualize what it means to welcome God's shalom into our lives and into that world.

SPT integrates a cluster of theo-ethical principles that draw on three theo-ethicists: theological anthropology informed by Christian realist Reinhold Niebuhr, nonviolence informed by personalist Martin Luther King, Jr., and Doris Janzen Longacre's feminist reconstruction of nonconformity. Because I am committed to interpreting and applying SPT in real, live communities, SPT includes three practices that make integrating the three principles possible: transparency in naming the influential members in

our communities, nonviolent communication, and the discipline of circle process.

Realistic Theological Anthropology

One of Niebuhr's contributions to 20th-century Christian thought is an insistence that "sin" is a necessary, not dirty, word in our theological vocabulary. Through his pastoral work, activism, and academic work, Niebuhr came to the conclusion that American liberal theology had led Christians down the wrong path. By sentimentalizing Jesus' message "beyond all recognition," liberal Christianity was dismissing the biblical foundations of Christian faith, replacing them with middle-class idealism and moralizing. Niebuhr took an alternative path "theologically to the right and politically to the left of modern liberal Protestantism," and urged others to join him in taking an existentialist view of the Bible's ideas and insights about human beings.[45]

In the preface to a 1964 edition of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr explains his basic thesis that Western culture has emphasized two ideas—individuality and meaningful history—that are actually rooted in the Hebraic biblical tradition. In tracing "the growth, corruption, and purification of these two concepts," he hopes his two volumes might "create a better understanding between the historic roots and the several disciplines of our modern culture which were concerned with the human situation."[46] The biblical roots to which Niebuhr brought new attention involve the enduring paradox of human beings, the fact that we carry in us God's image while also being finite creatures. This paradox, held dialectically, is the foundation of Niebuhr's theological anthropology.

A second dialectic that grounds this anthropology and Niebuhr's theology overall is a vertical dialectic of transcendence and relatedness. Langdon Gilkey identifies a three-fold use of transcendence in Niebuhr's theology: transcendence as anchored in God beyond our immediate

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[45] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Dr. Niebuhr's Position," *The Christian Century* 50 (1933): 91-92, quoted in Gary J. Dorrien, *Idealism, Realism, and Modernity: 1900–1950* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 451.

[46] Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), vii.

reality; as the ground of reality, meaning, judgment, and hope; and as self-transcendence, our capacity to rise above self-interest and relate to God. "Despite the fact that transcendence as Niebuhr sees it is not an aspect of the human psyche or of cultural history, this is a transcendence continually related to the world—related, that is, not only to individual persons, but even more to society, culture, and history."[47]

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference": this prayer attributed to Niebuhr is a microcosm of his theological anthropology. There is an appeal to God, who transcends and judges human history and culture; there is hope that, through our relationship with God, we may discern how self-interest and self-deception distort the *imago Dei*, leading us to think we can change anything we think should be changed; and there is reassurance that our creaturely freedom can also be a source of inspiration to combat injustice.

Nonviolence and Beloved Community

Martin Luther King, Jr. did not begin his career as an activist but as a Baptist preacher. Finding himself leading a movement for civil rights came as a surprise to the young King, who had become a sought-after orator and hoped to eventually occupy an academic chair. As the movement took off, he became aware that he needed to apply his theological education to tasks that involved more than sermon writing and pastoral care. As he applied religious belief to moral and political action, he was not simply drawing from the wells of his graduate school experience; he was also integrating theo-ethical lessons learned in childhood into what would become a full-scale system of theology. King scholar and personalist Rufus Burrow, Jr. has coined this system "Afrikan American Personalism," linking King's intellectual training with the Boston school of personalism and his "homespun" personalism that was integral to his view of God, human beings, love, and justice.[48]

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[47] Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001), 17, emphasis Gilkey's.

[48] Burrow uses the Black Consciousness spelling of Afrika, which, he writes, is a prevalent and preferred spelling on the continent and in the diaspora. Rufus Burrow, Jr., *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 2.

Burrow names five personalist ideas that animate King's theology and ethics, specifically his belief in nonviolence and his vision of the beloved community: reality is personal; reality is social; "persons" are of the highest intrinsic value; the universe is based on an objective moral order; and social injustice requires our protest as we establish a community of love.[49]

The goal of King's activism was the recognition of the human worth and dignity of all peoples and their inclusion in the "world house." Nonviolence was not merely a tactic for him; it indicated the kind of relationship he wanted black people to have with their neighbors, whether white, black, or brown. In 1966 King wrote about these dynamics in an essay on nonviolence, in the face of competing calls from other activists for violence and self-defense: "The American racial revolution has been a revolution to 'get in' rather than to overthrow. We want a share in the American economy, the housing market, the educational system, and the social opportunities. This goal itself indicates that a social change in America must be nonviolent."[50]

This conviction is directly connected to King's characterization of nonviolence as a way of life that does not seek to humiliate one's opponent but to bring both self and opponent to the same side, the side of God's justice; these are the politics of shalom. With his optimism, held in dialectical tension with Niebuhrian realism about the morality of groups within society, King argued that an outcome of nonviolence is the beloved community, a reality created cooperatively by God and human beings, a reality that appears in our midst here and in our speaking prophetic words of judgment, and in our daily decisions to suffer rather than retaliate, and to live as mystics who notice how God is at work in the world.[51]

Feminist Reconstruction of Nonconformity

Reconstruction is an approach to theology's constructive task that identifies the need to take things apart (deconstruct) and then put them back together

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[49] Ibid., 86.

[50] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 58.

[51] See various sermons and addresses in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.,* vol. 4, ed. Clayborne Carson et al. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000). See Burrow, *God and Human Dignity,* 169.

in a process that may use different materials, design, and techniques. One model for such reconstruction has been generated by the Workgroup on Constructive Theology, a collective that has authored a number of theology texts, including *Reconstructing Christian Theology*.[52] Within theology's new discursive context, Workgroup members advocate for analyzing Christian doctrine with "the goal of shaping a revisioned Christian communal praxis," the word "communal" signaling the variety of communities now involved in the production of theology.[53]

One of the multiple junctures where reconstructive work happens is the place where we decide to reformulate what a doctrine symbolizes rather than rejecting it outright. This process involves naming the ways traditional doctrinal formulation has contributed to the current crisis, resulting in Christian theology's anemic response to pressing social issues and problems. A second juncture is reclaiming theologians' work of speaking directly to particular communities and society as a whole, sharing new insights that emerge from the reconstructive process. Rebecca Chopp and Mark Taylor note that "alternative modes of address, perhaps employing the poetic or mixing words and images in novel ways, may be extremely important today for reconstructing an engagement of theologians with artists and activists, who are especially needed for social and ecclesial transformation."[54]

In this vein, Doris Janzen Longacre, starting with a cookbook, has reconstructed the Anabaptist/Mennonite doctrine of nonconformity (based on Romans 12:2, 1 John 2:15-16, and 1 Peter 2:11). Describing Mennonites as good cooks who also care about the world's hungry in the preface to *More-with-Less*, Longacre deftly recasts this cultural heritage in spiritual terms: "We are looking for ways to live more simply and joyfully, ways that grow out of our tradition but take their shape from living faith and the demands of our hungry world."[55] Part 1 of *Living More with Less* gives Longacre's biblical, theological, and ethical foundations for putting this new consciousness about the world into action. She outlines five principles or standards to guide

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[52] Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor, eds., *Reconstructing Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

[53] Ibid., 12.

[54] Chopp and Taylor, "Introduction," in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, 20.

[55] Doris Janzen Longacre, *More-with-Less Cookbook* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 13.

theological reflection: (1) do justice, (2) learn from the world community, (3) cherish the natural order, (4) nurture people, (5) nonconform freely.[56] While these principles may seem obvious, the next question she addresses adds considerable complexity: How might these theological norms become concrete action?

With the fifth standard, Longacre freed a valuable biblical idea that had, by the 1950s and '60s, become ideologically and ethically entrenched as church leaders sought to keep "worldliness" out of their congregations and communities. From her vantage point, Longacre saw that the rigidity of not conforming to the world had lost both its prophetic edge and its possibility of symbolizing freedom, joy, and transformation. Seeking to recapture the apostle Paul's radical message, she proposed a new, reconstructed approach to nonconformity marked by individual and communal choices to free ourselves from patterns of overconsumption and the imperialist mentality that equates affluence with wisdom.

While Longacre never identified herself or her work as explicitly feminist, she was deeply committed to viewing the world as one gigantic ecosystem and did not shy away from naming the evils of imperial exploitation from her social location as a woman. This fits with a primary philosophical tenet of feminist theory and theology: patriarchy creates and maintains an ontological hierarchy to keep a small number of (male) people in control by using mechanisms of exploitation and oppression, particularly by dominating female bodies, symbols, and concepts, including the planet. Longacre's reconstruction of nonconformity as a practice of Christian freedom challenges North American hubris, raises awareness about the dehumanizing features of our cultures, and makes these issues theo-ethical problems. Following the path of her analysis in combination with Niebuhr and King, I see a way forward to a theologically rich understanding of Christian discipleship invested in all people's wellbeing.

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[56] Doris Janzen Longacre, *Living More with Less* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 21ff. While Longacre describes these "life standards" as her alternative way of speaking about "lifestyle," she notes that "standard is a word that fits a way of life governed by more than fleeting taste. It is permanent and firm without being as tight as 'rules'" (16).

Three Practices of Shalom Political Theology
In *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City—An Anabaptist Theology of Culture,* Duane Friesen describes the importance of "focal practices," the ontological commitments, lifestyle choices, and behaviors that express a community's vision of the common good, for well-grounded moral formation.[57] Friesen's discussion of rituals of moral formation, process practices, pastoral care, and practices of service has drawn my attention to how my own moral formation and primary socialization in Mennonite community taught me more about avoiding conflict under the guise of "peacemaking" than about pursuing shalom. What draws me to Niebuhr, King, and Longacre is how their ideas provide tools to develop a multivalent outward/inward awareness of my life as a Christian, the group dynamics of my congregation, the institutional and interpersonal challenges of my workplace, and an understanding of what those things have to do with the rest of the world. Thus, if SPT is to be a meaningful alternative to the pacifism of the Messianic community, I believe it must include formative shalom practices so that Mennonite communities are no longer easy prey to the criticism that we are more ready to help our global neighbors solve their conflicts than we are to face our own. I will now briefly summarize three ways I have been practicing SPT.[58]

First is naming the influential members of my faith community as such. As a corrective to the over-zealousness of bishops, Anabaptist interpretations of "the priesthood of all believers" can turn this principle into a false egalitarianism. Using the theo-ethics of SPT, I have seen how integrity takes root when groups come to terms with the fact that some people's opinions count more than others. The Quaker tradition of recognizing "weighty Friends" as those who have spiritual maturity and theological insight that gives their opinions more authority in times of conflict or discernment is

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[57] Duane Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City—An Anabaptist Theology of Culture* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005), 139ff.

[58] I am at work on a book-length project that elaborates on these practices, relating their pragmatic wisdom to wisdom literature's appropriations of social justice codes, providing a pattern for how to integrate and theologize practices that come to us without a particular confessional or religious orientation, which is true for two of these practices. These practices can be particularly useful in conflicts centered on sexual violence, a moral and social problem that some types of peace theology inexcusably exacerbate.

one that Mennonite peace theologies can learn from. Such naming creates a climate of honesty about how power dynamics shape our interactions with each other, making it possible to speak more truthfully about the internal politics of being church.

Second is nonviolent communication (NVC), a communication process developed by clinical psychologist Marshall B. Rosenberg that cultivates empathy and compassion as requisites for personal and communal well-being.[59] By practicing NVC's pattern of observing without judgment, identifying emotions and needs in light of observation, and making requests (not demands) based on emotions and needs, I have realized how much my communal formation taught me to communicate passive-aggressively with inadequate vocabulary for communication that nurtures empathic connection and assertiveness. When we mistake peace theo-ethics for conflict avoidance, we sacrifice our well-being, pacifying ourselves with self-righteousness instead of enacting shalom. Jesus does not ask us to love our neighbors more or instead of ourselves, he urges us to love our neighbors and ourselves. NVC is one concrete way to explore how a commitment to nonviolence can manifest the double-love command (Matt. 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:25-28).

Third is circle process, a practice of creating a social container for all voices to be heard and valued in what M. Scott Peck calls "real community."[60] This practice intersects with NVC, and together they are powerful tools for addressing painful topics and celebrating what is good in the world. There are many ways and reasons to form circles; diversity circles and restorative justice circles are well-known examples. My circle practice is based on a model called PeerSpirit Circling and the Circle Way.[61] Through this practice in the classroom, in congregational life, and even at the extended family dinner table, I have been astounded at what happens when we begin to

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[59] Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life,* 3rd ed. (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2015).

[60] Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010), 12. M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 59.

[61] Along with Baldwin and Linnea, *The Circle Way,* websites for PeerSpirit (http://peerspirit.com/) and Calling the Circle (http://callingthecircle.org/) provide introductions to PeerSpirit Circling.

rely on everyone to carry and shape the conversation, instead of the usual suspects. Breaking with cultural norms that make interruption inevitable and silence uncomfortable, circle process has given me a way to explore SPT as a theo-ethic of nonconformity and spiritual renewal. I have seen shalom happen when people ask for what they need from the circle, and I have heard people bear witness to how sharing in another's vulnerability taught them something new about what it means to be a Christian.

Conclusion

SPT grounds a commitment to peace, justice, nonviolence, and nonconformity in a theological anthropology that takes sin and power dynamics seriously. My hope is that SPT also grounds socially responsible political engagement, challenging our often employed but simplistic biblical hermeneutics that identify the Christian call to pacifism with Jesus' words commanding us to love our enemies. This approach all too often and all too easily fails to avoid ideological pitfalls with hubris masquerading as righteousness. Peace theology and ethics employing a realistic view of human nature lead to moral formation that curbs our tendencies toward making sharp binary distinctions. For example, the statement of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA that "war is contrary to the will of God" was not originally a pacifistic statement. However, some Christians read it pacifistically, leading to an interpretation that makes a pacifistic view of Christian faith theologically normative rather than allowing for a variety of faithful understandings. Once this kind of claim becomes normative, Christians begin to advocate for public policies to outlaw war. When this happens, we draw a divide between those who are moral and those who are immoral; in the cosmic barnyard, pacifists are the sheep and warmongers are the goats. This was one of Niebuhr's chief reasons for leaving the Christian pacifist position and developing a realistic view of theological anthropology, which SPT emphasizes.

When peace theology sheds the language of pacifism and takes up the language of nonviolence in the tradition of King, it also reorients itself to a metaphysics that envisions shalom. This turn underscores both the agency we have as free persons and the fragility of this freedom in a society with the power to structure our lives in ways that distort our dignity and confine our

choices.

      Generations of contemporary Mennonites across subcultures learned that peacemaking meant avoiding conflict, objecting to war as a matter of conscience, and "loving our enemies," but we need something more if we are going to proclaim a gospel that renounces violence. Looking back, we can see that if we reduce peace theology to avoiding conflict, then it will only ever be a theo-ethics of privilege. And if we reduce it to an orientation of personal obedience to communal norms, then it will only ever be a peculiar form of discipleship. If, however, we enact peace theology as a theo-ethics seeking shalom as a way of imagining God's politics, then our witness becomes a form of social engagement with the world that hopes for personal and communal transformation. Shalom is a way of invoking the power of life's goodness despite the suffering, exploitation, violence, and alienation that remind us that evil is as powerful as ever. Shalom is invested in the quality of our living and loving. Shalom paints vivid pictures of opposites embracing—unlikely allies laughing with abandon as they break bread together, wolves and lambs enjoying the shade of the same tree, an unshakeable sense that we belong.

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